



Forest Research

# Consultation and community involvement in forest planning

Research in Cranborne Chase and North Dorset





**Forest Research**  
The Research Agency of the Forestry Commission

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**Paul Tabbush**

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Forest Research

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## Foreword

The research by Forest Research reported in this publication was commissioned in response to our request for an evaluation of the New Forest–New Futures consultation process. This process entailed listening to a wide range of stakeholders, including local residents and local experts, as well as representatives from the relevant National Agencies. The process we went through in the New Forest, while very time and labour intensive, was also an enriching and revelatory experience for the staff involved as well as for the organisation. The journey we embarked on was not always comfortable. Recognising at the beginning that there could be no predetermined outcomes meant that all stakeholders' contributions had to be determined, analysed, and then balance and consensus sought. I believe we achieved a new level of successful working with all stakeholders involved and it is vital we build on this for the future.

We have learned much by the experience. However, we have not always been able to stop, look back and reflect, and then consolidate what we have learned. This is the value of a formal research evaluation such as this, which I hope will be the first of many.

**Rod Leslie**

Forest Enterprise (England)



## Executive summary

As part of Forest Design Planning, qualitative social research methods were used to describe and evaluate the participatory process developed in the New Forest. The process was followed in action at Cranborne Chase and North Dorset Forest District; interviews and discussion groups were held in 2003 and 2004. The participatory process was in two stages:

1. The Forest Design Plan (FDP) Forum
2. Community Engagement.

The first stage involved statutory consultees and other influential figures; the second targeted local communities.

There is no doubt about the benefits of this new dialogue both to Forest Enterprise (FE) managers and to members of the FDP Forum. FE now feel they have a 'licence to operate' and they are freed from expensive and unproductive conflict. Forum members, for the most part, feel that their views are being listened to and acted upon.

The FDP Forum process worked well, and was clearly valued by the Forum members. It could be improved by:

- Making a clearer distinction between strategic and site-specific issues, and choosing engagement methods appropriate to these two sets of issues.
- Careful, iterative recording and feedback of views expressed, demonstrating that participants are being listened to and that their views are incorporated into the plans and acted upon.

The second stage focused on community engagement, mainly through drop-in days and forest walks. This had worked well in some instances in the New Forest, but the results were variable, and the drop-in days at Shaftesbury and Blandford Forum were poorly attended. It is recommended that the objectives of community engagement should be reviewed, especially in relation to districts with a fragmented forest holding. Formal stakeholder analysis should be followed by design of methodologies that meet the needs of the individual stakeholder groups.

Discussion groups held in Blandford Forum with local people who had not participated in the design planning process, revealed a strong demand for more local use of woodlands, and a number of important issues relating to confused understanding of the accessibility of woods. There was clear potential to enhance the delivery of public benefit from FE woodlands. Local communities were not effectively reached by drop-in days, and it is recommended that the objectives and methodologies used by Forest Enterprise, especially in areas with fragmented land holdings, should be reconsidered. Objectives to enhance the delivery of public benefits to local communities, and to involve local communities in making decisions that affect their environment, would justify the necessary investment in a participatory process to explore local understandings in more depth. The greatest demand will be for dialogue concerning relatively simple issues, particularly concerning access and facilities, and these are best dealt with using informal techniques such as forest walks and coffee mornings. Large strategic issues, like the restoration of lowland heaths, will need a more formal approach.



## Introduction

Following a meeting in Bristol with Forest Enterprise in March 2003, planning began to carry out an evaluation of 'New Forest–New Future' (NFNF), to start in October 2003.

Research has been completed into participation in the FC 'Long Term Forest Plan' process (Tabbush, 2001, 2004) and also into stakeholder analysis and the use of participatory tools in relation to FE design plans (Hislop *et al.*, 2004). The NFNF consultation process, carried out over a 4-year period 1996–2000, was seen by FE managers to be successful in getting plans agreed, and represents the development of participatory practice by local managers to meet local needs. This process has not been properly described and evaluated, and a starting point for the present study was a recognition that good practice developed in the New Forest should be captured so that it can be shared with other Forestry Commission managers and other countryside management professionals. The NFNF consultation process was implemented by forest managers over a 4-year period (1996–2000) and it is not easy to capture the detail of the process, or to evaluate it after such a long time lapse, but building on their experience, the New Forest (FE) managers have now conducted (in 2003–04) a similar exercise in relation to the Cranborne Chase and North Dorset (CC&ND) Forest Design Plan. This process was therefore chosen as the focus for primary research.

Following the introductory section, the publication is divided into four main sections.

1. Description of the New Forest–New Future process with reference to the sources (documents and interviews).
2. Consideration of the process as applied in Cranborne Chase and North Dorset.
3. Critical review of the results.
4. Conclusions and recommendations.

## Background

### Public participation in Forest Design Planning

Public participation in environmental decision-making is fundamental to sustainable development and sustainable forest management, and is woven into the policy fabric within which the Forestry Commission operates. A small booklet entitled *Involving communities in forestry* (Forestry Commission, 1996) gave a clear picture of an aspiration towards genuine community involvement, building on recent experience, especially in relation to the 'Community Forests' being developed near centres of population. The *England Forestry Strategy* (Forestry Commission, 1999), reflects the development of the participation discourse during the 1990s:

Above all, the Government wants this Forestry Strategy to be a vehicle for gaining public confidence and support for the benefits of well-managed woods and forests. A key principle of our approach is to increase awareness of the relevance of woodlands to all parts of society. We need to encourage a climate of positive thinking at all levels. To achieve this end, the Government will want to work with others to promote the value of woodland at the national, regional and local levels (page 6).

The Forestry Commission's *Corporate Plan for England (2002)* also sets out a clear aspiration to involve communities:

The creation and sustainable management of woodlands can present significant issues and opportunities for society. The active early involvement of stakeholders will often improve plans and enable woodlands to make a valued long-term contribution to sustainable development. The Community Forests, the National Forest, the National Trust and the Woodland Trust, amongst others, are making valuable contributions to the fast-developing field of community involvement in countryside and peri-urban land management. Forest Enterprise is committed to increasing the involvement of people and communities in the sustainable management of the public forest estate and in 2000 published its approach in *Our commitment to working with communities in England*. Many other woodland owners develop their plans with the involvement of local communities and stakeholders. The Forestry Commission, in addition to formal consultation procedures on felling licences and Woodland Grant Schemes, now also supports landowners in undertaking wide-ranging scoping studies which are used to inform the preparation of long-term forest plans.

These scoping studies have been the subject of previous research (Tabbush 2001, 2004). In 2001 the Annual Report for Forest Enterprise (Forest Enterprise, 2001: 31) included a section on 'Working with the community' which contained seven points from the strategy for involving communities in Scotland announced by Angus Mackay (Member of the Scottish Parliament) in July 1999, including:

A more listening consulting, integrating and transparent approach towards the preparation of forest plans.

Design planning represents one opportunity for decision-making; others would include major new developments such as recreation facilities or landscape works. Major works are normally the subject of planning consultation, and could also reasonably be expected to be debated as part of the design planning exercise for the area. This leaves the design plan as the major focus for meeting the public participation requirements for Forest Enterprise.

## Research methods

The research was based on qualitative social research methodologies. CC&ND Design Plan Forum meetings were attended by the researcher (see Figure 1a, b and c), and also the subsequent 'drop-in' days. Existing relevant documents were collected for analysis and four semi-structured interviews and two in-depth discussion groups carried out in the early part of 2004. Each discussion group comprised ten individuals recruited from residents of Blandford Forum who had not been involved in the FE participatory process. Recruitment was by research contractor ('Quality Fieldwork') using the following criteria:

- A good cross-section of ages in each group.
- A balance between genders in each group.
- All residents to have lived in Blandford Forum for more than 2 years.
- A good cross-section of socio-economic groups in each group.
- No respondent to have been consulted by the Forestry Commission concerning plans for the area.

The methodology for these groups followed the example of Burgess *et al.* (1988), but with only a single session for each group held consecutively on the evening of 28 April 2004 in Blandford Forum Community Room, each lasting for just over 1 hour. The discussions were semi-structured, in that they followed a pre-prepared set of questions, but participants were encouraged to develop the discussions and to introduce their own agendas and opinions.



**Figure 1**

Design Plan Forum meetings and discussions.  
(a) Meeting at Rushmore golf club which included presentations and group discussions based on detailed maps.  
(b) and (c) Discussions on the restoration of plantations on ancient woodland sites (PAWS) and coppice restoration at Cranborne Chase.



(a)



(b)



(c)

## Questions for the discussion groups

### Background

1. Which of these (on the map) are your local woods?
2. Do you know which woodlands in the area are managed by FE? (show map) OR Who else owns accessible woodlands?
3. Does FE ownership make them more accessible?
4. Please explain how (and how often) you use them and why.
5. Are they easy to get to? By bus?
6. What are the other accessible spaces?
7. Did you use them when you were a child?
8. What was your first woodland memory?
9. Do your children use them?
10. Give reasons why not?
11. What value do you think they have to you/the community?
12. How does FE manage these woods?
13. How can their management be improved?

### Engagement process

14. Did you see any FE notices about meetings etc?
15. Did you know about the FE drop-in days?
16. Would you wish to have more say/more information about the management of the woodlands?
17. How best should FE make contact with the local community?  
Local paper? Leaflets? Meetings? Guided walks?
18. Do you think FE would manage the woods in your interests even if you were not consulted?

Participants each received £25 to cover out-of-pocket expenses. Interviews and discussion groups were recorded using digital equipment and the results transcribed verbatim for import into qualitative research software ('QSR Nvivo'). All texts were then coded and analysed using a version of discourse analysis (Bryman, 2001) to extract the major themes. This publication draws on this body of evidence in describing and evaluating the process observed. Verbatim quotes are often used and are attributed to the sources described in Box 1.

**Box 1**

Annotated list of sources.

**Document: New Forest Inclosures Forest Design Plan**

A history and explanation of the New Forest–New Future process written by Simon Smith in his role as planning officer for Forest Enterprise, based in the New Forest.

**Document: Changing forest–changing cultures**

A poster display prepared by Rod Leslie in November 2002, in his role as Environment Manager for Forest Enterprise, England.

**Document: CRN article**

Undated. Written by Michael Seddon and Bridgette Hall for the Countryside Recreation Network. Michael Seddon (now Deputy Surveyor of the New Forest) was Recreation Manager in the New Forest at the time. Bridgette Hall was Communications Manager for the district and is now Environment Development Manager for the Commission's Peninsula Forest District.

**DB** Officer of English Nature and a member of the CC&ND FDP Forum. Notes taken at an interview on 29 April 2004.

**HCP** Assistant County Archaeologist for Wiltshire and member of the CC&ND FDP Forum. Transcript from an office interview at Trowbridge on 28 April 2004. Interview transcript.

**JS** Currently Recreation and Community Manager for Forest Enterprise (England) but played an active role in setting up the NFNF process while in a temporary post as Environment Manager for South and West England. Interviewed in his office in Bristol on 9 March 2004. Interview transcript.

**SS** Planning Officer for Forest Enterprise, New Forest (Forest District). Interviewed at his office in the New Forest on 28 January 2004. Interview transcript.





## PART 1

# The New Forest– New Future process



This section begins with a description of the circumstances and drivers that brought the process into being, before describing how it was actually conducted.

## Purposes and drivers behind the process

By the time that the NFNF process began in 1996, the need for resolution to current forest management problems in the New Forest was acute. Criticism of the production-centred outlook of the Forestry Commission came from local residents and other professional organisations. This was interpreted by forest managers as a radical loss of public support, a loss of their ‘licence to operate’:

**JS (FE Manager)** We didn’t really have a licence to operate..... in that everything was disputed, for example there had been major discussions with many *professionals* about bits of wind blow not being restocked and on the one hand the Forestry Commission would be wanted to restock wall to wall, fight every inch of the way, on the other hand why fight for low yield class conifer on (heathland) sprouting heather at such a rapid rate that it’s going to be a nightmare to restock. The tide had began to turn as it were that we had to think more radically about - couldn’t just think production forestry.....It’s not a very pleasant culture to live and work in when you know that virtually every piece of feedback ...from *local residents* is going to be negative. (Italics indicate author’s emphasis).

The interviewee here identified ‘professionals’ and ‘local residents’ as separate groups of stakeholders. The loss of licence to operate was perceived as a need to build trust with both these groups.

**Document: Changing forests–Changing cultures** In a political environment where distrust and conflict had been common everyone, not just the foresters, found themselves having to think again about their views.

**Document: New Forest Inclosures FDP** Arguments were common as EN and FC negotiated management options. Because of conflicting priorities and the lack of wider forest context, eventual plans were often limited to uncontentious actions. Ultimately, the condition of the Forest declined both in nature conservation and timber quality terms..... Many broadleaf stands were left unthinned due to public opposition to the felling of any broadleaves and habitat restoration issues were tackled in a piecemeal way due to the lack of a strategic vision.

A reorientation of the way in which Forest Enterprise communicated with its major stakeholders began to be forced from outside the organisation, and was also seen from inside as a possible way forward:

**Document: Changing forests–Changing cultures** NGO conservation bodies forced their way into the consultation process through political lobbying, and we started telling people, then consulting, on our plans.

**JS** Many of the professional people were saying, very openly and adversely, the Forestry Commission are not the right people to manage the Crown lands...we actually wanted to be perceived as the right people to manage the New Forest for what society in broader terms wanted it for, not just what conservationists wanted it for but what the timber management, the visitors, the residents wanted ... we didn't believe we were necessarily the wrong people, to manage the land, we felt we could redeem that position perhaps by going through this (NFNF) process.

Another driver was the need to apply the Forest Design Plan (FDP) process, that involved the application of the *UK Forestry Standard* and hence principles of Sustainable Forest Management. This amounted to general FE policy, and it was an embarrassment to FE managers that they had not been able to implement it in the New Forest. This was significant in that it determined the character of the process. For the forest managers, it was about getting the FDPs accepted, so that there would be an agreed basis for forest operations.

## Structure of the New Forest–New Future process

A history of FDPs in the New Forest and the development of the New Forest Forum was described by Simon Smith in the document: *New Forest Inclosures Forest Design Plan*. A two-stage process is described: (1) the Design Plan Forum and (2) Engagement with local communities. It is the second process that is described as 'New Forest–New Future':

### **Document: New Forest Inclosures Forest Design Plan**

1. Initial work consisted of drawing together a forum of individuals from statutory and non-statutory bodies to form a New Forest, Forest Design Plan Forum.
2. .... A public consultation exercise was launched to support and run parallel with our statutory consultation process. This was to be formally launched under the banner 'New Forest New Future(s)' with an initial launch event at Dibden Inclosure (a phase A inclosure and one of the first to have draft plans prepared) at which forum members, community representatives and the media were invited to hear speeches from Forest Enterprise, English Nature and New Forest Association representatives. This was followed by a guided walk through Dibden Inclosure to explain to delegates how FDP proposals may change the structure of this particular inclosure over time.

## The Forest Design Plan Forum

The creation of the FDP forum was therefore the first main step, the idea being to create and facilitate a group that could bring forward and debate 'expert' issues related to the content of the FDP itself. The membership of the forum was designed with the need to consult 'official' interests in mind, but it was also designed to include the Forestry Commission's major critics:

**Document: New Forest Inclosures FDP** The forum consists of individuals from statutory bodies such as the New Forest Verderers, English Nature, English Heritage and Hampshire County Council and those from non statutory bodies such as Hampshire Wildlife Trust and The New Forest Association. In addition to representatives from these organisations individual local experts were asked to become members of the forum. These individuals included some with an ecological or local history expertise and those with a timber contracting or processing background. Selection of members of the Forum was carefully considered to ensure as wide a range of views as possible. Those who had been strong critics of FC forest management in the past were invited to be forum members.

The agenda revolved around the FDP. The tension between the needs of economic forest production and those of nature conservation was never far from the surface, although the revised Ministerial Mandate for the New Forest of 1999, which placed conservation as the first objective, made it easier for forest managers to agree to the conservationists' demands. It was not easy for some forest managers to come to terms with a new vision of the future of the New Forest:

**Document: New Forest Inclosures FDP** Initial meetings of the Forum consisted of the presentation of background information including maps produced on GIS depicting current species structure, distribution of yield class, ecological features etc. The first Forest Design Planning task undertaken by District Staff in consultation with the Forum was the production of a 100 year indicative strategy for the New Forest Inclosures.

**JS** We actually had to gamble that something sensible would come out of it. We didn't know if it was something we would be comfortable with and actually when you look at the Forestry Commission's staff involved in the process and what their particular interests are, what they were comfortable with, there were those who had been born and bred in production, through to those who came from an ecological background ..... Each individual probably hoped that there would be gains to their particular interests.

One of the major functions of the panel, which contained much national and local expertise, was to bring knowledge to bear on the issues that related to each forest inclosure:

**JS** Right at the very beginning we said you are the experts.... many of you actually have information which we don't have access to. If you look at the information that we have ...it is not well catalogued, it's not interrelated and many of you hold key information.....it was an unlocking of expertise.

It was the Forestry Commission's vision for the inclosures that was being discussed by the forum, although in the light of the forum's informed opinions, the plans were amended:

**SS** ...Forest Design Plan Forum which comprised all the statutory people we needed to consult; local individuals - the so called noisy individuals who had a particular ecological or archaeological or historic interest .. and we got them all around a table and we put our 100-year decision (vision) to them and consulted them and said ...do you think this is roughly the right way forward, and it was amended in the light of their comments – there was a good deal of give and take about what we could do and what we couldn't do, heathland restoration for example was a big issue.

Heathland restoration here meant the removal of (productive) forest trees to create areas of lowland heath, an internationally important habitat, listed in the European Habitats Directive. This process was championed by English Nature and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. For the associated loss of economic production to be acceptable to the Forestry Commission, there would have to be tangible conservation gains:

**JS** The Forestry Minister would struggle to allow us to wipe large areas of trees off the face of the earth within the forestry act....without considerable conservation gains.

It was this issue that led to the first, and most often referred to, instance of community engagement.

## Community engagement

In the absence of a clear rationale for resolving the difference of view on heathland restoration, FE managers saw that the local users had a different agenda for these woods. Local residents in the Waterside estate, on the edge of the forest, were used to making informal use of their local woodland, and were opposed to its wholesale conversion to heathland. The FE managers saw that a deliberation between the Forum and the Waterside Estate community (on the edge of the New Forest) might result in a compromise that would not result in the wholesale removal of forest. This, indeed, is the compromise that was achieved:

**JS** Waterside was very good because communities and forum members realised that that .... was a circular process because the plans got modified to retain more of the 50s and 60s conifers than the forum group wanted because residents were saying that we want more shelter for our dog walking.

The methods used were quite different from those used to operate the FDP forum, and indeed the forum members were involved in a leadership role:

**JS** When [the FE manager] presented his communication plan and the sort of events he wanted to try and put on etc etc, he said very overtly: now I really don't want these to be Forestry Commission events but as Forum events I would really like it if Forum members could actually think about which ones were appropriate for them to come along to, and they could actually lead them.

## Public involvement tools employed

The FDPF proceeded through a series of indoor and outdoor professional meetings, and the main interest in public involvement methodologies centred on the second-stage process in which local residents were contacted. It was recognised that public meetings tend to give a platform to those who protest the loudest and so are not inclusive, and therefore the preferred tool used was a type of open meeting that became known as a 'drop-in day':

**Document: New Forest Inclosures Forest Design Plan** The main body of the public consultation consisted of events held at parish and church halls where draft plans were available for the public to view. Forest Enterprise staff were on hand throughout the day (12 to 7 pm) to provide interpretation and to answer questions.

Forum members were included and sometimes asked to take a leadership role in these events, as a means of building the credibility of the process:

**JS** Forum members then started pitching in to going to these events and that is a very powerful tool.....actually when you are in Minstead Parish Hall and you have got English Nature, the Verderers etc. all standing behind you saying this is the best thing since sliced bread, it is very powerful.

The drop-in days were sometimes supplemented by formal talks, and less-formal walks through the forest:

**Document: New Forest Inclosures Forest Design Plan** A formal presentation would be given at the venue in the evening explaining the historical and ecological importance of the New Forest and outlining the Forest Design Plan process. This was followed by a question and answer session during which Forest Enterprise staff and FDP Forum members would answer questions from the public relating to the local woodlands, the FDP process or any other aspect of forest management. These events were publicised in the local press, TV, radio and through the use of posters at inclosure gateways. Attendance at the events was variable ranging from just 3 at one event to over 80 at another. In addition to the indoor public consultation events, a guided walk through parts of the relevant forest inclosures was held, normally timed for the weekend following the public/church hall meeting. At these events particular aspects of the FDP proposals could be discussed on site and questions asked by the public participants. Events were led by a district recreation ranger supported by a member of the district planning team and the local keeper. Forum members were encouraged to attend both the public hall meetings and the guided walks. As with the indoor events, attendance was variable but mainly in the 20 to 30 range.... Those unable to join the walks and talks were invited to write in with their views on the proposals.

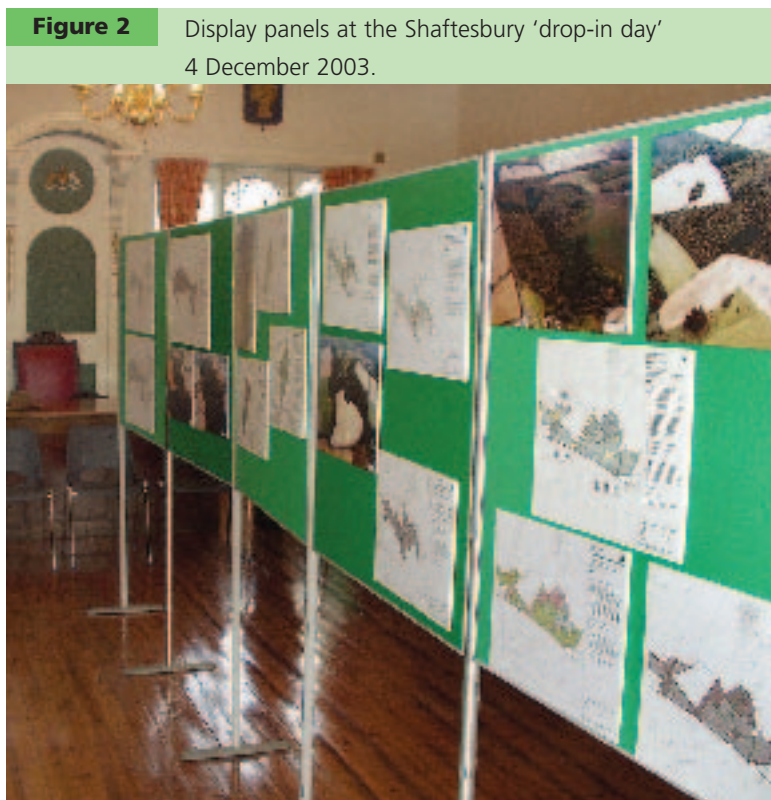
The level of attendance tended to be influenced by the issues at stake, how contentious they were and how relevant to the local population:

**SS** In some places we had up to 80 people come along for the meeting part, and in other places we had about half a dozen, depending on the location, and some areas people came along more for the education side of the process and were quite passive in the way that they were viewing plans.

Since the main drivers related to the FDP, a problem soon arose in relation to the language used, especially in relation to the local community, but also in relation to the FDPF group of professionals:

**Document: Changing Forest–Changing Cultures** Although we had opened up, foresters started by defending their plans. The plans themselves, unintentionally, helped limit discussion .....plans were hard to understand for non-professionals.

The plans were initially presented as 1:10 000 scale plans, drawn using specialist equipment and showing forestry details using technical language. The passive response described in the quote by SS above may have been the result of the use of this type of language.



Attempts were made to improve the accessibility of this information using aerial oblique photography, as shown on the display panels in Figure 2:

**Document: CRN article** Rangers had the task of converting the forum's technical and scientific language and maps into easily understandable ideas and visual aids. Aerial photographs were commissioned for every site and proved vital in getting the message across.

The next section describes how the process was applied to the FDP process for Cranborne Chase and North Dorset in 2003 and 2004.





## PART 2

# Cranborne Chase and North Dorset Forest Design Plan Forum



Since the process described in the New Forest was historical, the active part of the research concentrated on the current process, as applied in Cranborne Chase and North Dorset (CC&ND). The New Forest can be seen as a special case, for FE, in that it is a large single holding with deep historical and cultural connections. There is an active community of expert stakeholders, with a strong voice, especially in relation to issues of wildlife conservation. FE management can take advantage of economies of scale, and of the high profile of the New Forest, so that management is relatively intensive. This applies to the provision for access and recreation which is relatively well developed in the New Forest. In CC&ND, on the other hand, and more typical of the situation in England as a whole, forests are scattered in small blocks among farmland and privately owned woodlands, management is not intensive and provision for access tends to be low key.

Observation of the CC&ND process began with the second meeting of the CC&ND in October 2003, at the Forest Design Plan Forum at Rushmore golf club in Tolland Royal, Dorset. The venue was well appointed, and set out with tables for groups and facilities for powerpoint presentations (Figure 3).

**Figure 3** Cranborne Chase and North Dorset Forest Design Plan Forum meeting on 24 October 2003.



The members attending included a high proportion of Forestry Commission staff. The Forum members were Parish, District and County Councillors, staff of the Dorset Coppice Association, officials from English Nature and a representative of the County Archaeologist. This was the second meeting of the Forum; the first had resulted in some comments for inclusion in the plans. The meeting began with an introduction by the Deputy Surveyor of the New Forest who highlighted what he saw as the major issue: the restoration of ancient woodlands. Many of the small blocks of woodland that make up the FE estate in this area are classified as 'Ancient Woodland Sites' (Peterken, 1993), i.e. they are thought never to have been converted to agriculture, but do not carry the original tree species. The replacement of native broadleaves with more productive conifers was one of the practices of economically motivated forestry in the second half of the 20th century. Forest Enterprise now sees the reinstatement of native species in such woods as a priority, and its plans reflect that view. A series of powerpoint presentations by FE staff then explained the detail of the forest planning system, including a hierarchy of planning levels:



The rest of the meeting was taken up with a rotational visit to four tables, each lead by a FE 'expert' and focusing on a set of 1:10 000 forestry maps for a part of the district. The expert introduced the area, pointing out features such as local schools and landscape character. Participants were encouraged to write on the maps to record the issues important to them, or to write general points on self-adhesive stickers. In the event, many of the issues were not locally specific, e.g. 'it is a sin and a shame that that big beech is going for pulp'; 'access is limited in leased woodlands where the shooting rights are retained'; 'woods are tedious to walk through, they need wider rides and cleared areas'. This is not surprising given the professional and representative nature of the consultees, and calls into question the 'planning-for-real' approach which really applies to specific, site-based issues like a blockage to a specific footpath. Operational Site Assessment plans might be a better basis for site-based consultation. On the other hand, there are so many of these that resources would not allow consultation at that level.



The experts recorded the main points from the discussion and these, together with the notes on the maps, were then collated by the Design Plan Manager and incorporated into the plans as far as possible. This was followed by an afternoon field visit to a local wood (Figure 4), again focusing on native woodland restoration, and giving plenty of opportunity for informal and group discussions.

## Drop-in days

Following the FDP Forum activities, community engagement took the form of drop-in days in Blandford Forum Community Room on 28 November 2003 and in Shaftesbury Town Hall on 4 December 2003. Advertising for the events took the form of posters, similar to the one shown in Figure 5, at main entrances to the woodlands concerned, and placed outside the town halls and public libraries in both towns. A press release was taken up by local (Western Gazette/Bournemouth Echo) and national papers (Guardian/Western Morning News). However, attendance was very low at both events. At Blandford, 13 individuals 'dropped in' plus a single school group of 18.

The individuals were mostly interested parties, e.g. known personally to the FE ranger; Woodland Trust regional manager; local charcoal burner; female representative from Dorset Coppice Group; sporting tenant. No-one attended who might be described as a lay member of the local community interested in the management or use of the woods. At Shaftesbury one man lived close to one of the woods and walked in it regularly.

The rooms were set out with display panels (see Figure 2) and staffed by local Forest Enterprise personnel, including rangers who would have intimate local knowledge of the woods being discussed. Attendance was too low for meaningful analysis of the methods used at these events, and so a decision was taken to focus the research on non-specialist local residents who had not been involved in the process so far. This was achieved through the two in-depth discussion groups in Blandford Forum.

## Discussion groups at Blandford Forum

The groups gave a good insight into the concerns of local residents, and these concerns were often specific for different age groups:

### Male (Blandford discussion group 1):

I've never really got up and thought great I'll go for a walk today in the woods like wow, it's not really interesting from my point of view where I'm sitting its fair enough like you've got to take your kids there and stuff which is great, the kids would probably love it but as far as I'm concerned, being 23, I'm not really, it hasn't really bothered me. (Laughing)

**M** 23 liar (Laughing).

**M** I am 23 (Laughing), as far as I'm concerned the only advertising..... is families..... and as far as I'm concerned 20 year olds and around that mark I think its pretty much pointless.

**PT** You mean they're not getting.....

**M** I talk for quite a lot of people I know that as far as I'm concerned, my generation I don't think people are going to get up and go for a walk.

**PT** So no matter how much advertising.....

**M** Unless you know its something to do with paint balling in the woods things like that, activities going on, I don't think any one's really going to use it apart from families.....

### Female (Blandford discussion group 1):

just feel quite bad that there's not really much for them to do, when we were young, we lived out in the sticks, but we had the local swing park, not great but we made the most of it, it would be nice to think growing up in this area that they was something a bit more to do for the youngsters because there's just not.

**Figure 5** Poster advertising a drop-in day.



## Planning the future of our woodlands

People in the North Dorset area will be able to have their say on the future of local woodlands in November when the Forestry Commission will hold a public consultation event for its woodlands in the Shillingstone and Milton Abbas area.



**A drop in event** at  
**The Community Room in Blandford Town Hall**  
on **Friday 28th November 12.30pm to 6.30pm**

will be held at which people can view proposals for the long-term vision of woodlands in their local area. Forestry Commission staff will be on hand to answer questions and visitors will be encouraged to make comments on the proposals.

The proposals have been created in consultation with the Cranborne Chase and North Dorset Forest Design Plan Forum, whose members include representatives of parish and district councils, conservation organisations and neighbouring landowners. The proposals aim to balance the interests of public access for recreation and education, landscape design, nature conservation, timber production and rural employment.

One of the recurrent themes was the inadequate provision for access to the local woods, despite their potential value for health and education:

**Female (Blandford discussion group 2):**

I've got 5-year-old twins and we go out to the forests quite a lot walking, mostly our interest is leisure but as my children are getting older they are very interested in what they see around them and I don't think, especially locally, that there is enough educational facilities for small children. With them being only 5 they want to learn everything from the ground up so information about fungi and the shrubs that grow beneath the trees as well as about the trees themselves. We go to Moors Valley and ? Heath where there are quite good education centres, but I think locally we could do with like a visitor centre or some sort of thing, then we would stay more local and not travel out on a Sunday.

Another theme was a desire to preserve woodlands as a place to walk and as the antithesis of the destruction of nature through building development:

**Male (Blandford discussion group 2):**

I'm keen .....that woodlands are kept in a condition in which wildlife can flourish and also I do a lot of walking ..... not locally, more further afield maybe in the Wareham area, because they have got some good walks that way and a general interest in keeping our woodlands and not building them with concrete.

**Male (Blandford discussion group 1):**

with all the houses going up it nice to be talking about something other than houses going up really. It nice to talk about the trees and forestry for once.

Many comments related to the potential benefits of the woodlands for health, but the lack of accessibility was often mentioned:

**Male (Blandford discussion group 1):**

I'm keen on exercising like walking, running, camping or whatever it is and I think that in the present day and age we read about obese children and obese adults and I think to get people out in to the fresh air is very good. Therefore I think we should use the forest more but I've lived in Blandford since 1967 and I can't remember seeing any leaflets or anything that would encourage me to go and walk in the forest or where it is around Blandford.

**Female (Blandford discussion group 1):**

A lot of my friends do have disabled children and accessibility into these woods ..... (I am going to sound like a cynical parent here but a lot of you here sound like parents with normal children) they can not go into the woods and do normal things with their children because of accessibility with wheelchairs and that sort of thing – and that is a big problem around here. It is getting from the car park, down into the woods and getting through the woods, so they can sit amongst the bluebells, they can sit there and play guns, or whatever it is they want to do – they just can't do it.

**Female (Blandford discussion group 1):**

I went to one that was Forestry Commission one at the weekend. We had to take some photos of bluebells..... there is a turning that's up by Southern Rustics, if you go up by the white house then turn left there is a very small car park up there. There was a barrier which was down but you can still walk around it.

PT Has it got a sign saying it's Forestry Commission?

F Yes and I can't remember what it was called off the top of my head. But then it said 'beware of shooting' on the side of it.

Accessibility was also limited, especially for certain age groups, because there was 'nothing to do up there':

**Young male (Blandford discussion group 1):**

Unless you know there's something to do with paint balling in the woods things like that, activities going on, I don't think any one's really going to use it apart from families, .....The only way I have probably used the woods is to go paint balling and to go quad biking, which I think is brilliant.

Fear of crime, was also cited as a facet of poor accessibility:

**Male (Blandford discussion group 1):**

Another thing that tends to put people off is if you go over to Oakridge Hill and park your car there you're lucky if someone doesn't break in to it.

It was recognised that this fear may be to do with perception:

**Female (Blandford discussion group 1):**

There are more reports on the television now and we are more aware of sex offenders and we are more aware of the statistics on burglaries, thefts, assaults, you name it and we know about it and we all know in town who is doing what and that. Ten or 15 years ago, or even going back as far as 20 years ago we would not have known a fraction of that.

Accessibility was also limited by lack of information. Participants had little idea which woods belonged to the Forestry Commission, or whether access was permitted to them. They expressed strong needs for greater accessibility and more information:

**Male (Blandford discussion group 2):**

More by dog walkers than by anybody else. With regard to cyclists um, it's not always clear whether you can actually ride those tracks or not, although the tracks are made up with hard core and scalplings and are quite well maintained it's never very clear as to whether you can actually either walk along them or certainly not cycle.

**Female (Blandford discussion group 1):**

I have been down there like with the children and the dog ..... and you know it's heavy machinery, chainsaws and god knows what else and you think obviously not a child friendly day ..... But it never seems to be advertised how to get in on these things – you know – we are having a clearing day, or any other sort of activity like you were saying - it never seems to be advertised.

**M** It is just contacts, the church I belong to is one of the groups that helps together. It is like anything you get one person who is the contact to start with and then it spreads out doesn't it? That's what happens.

**F** Because I am a great one for reading the noticeboards around town but there never seems to be anything on there like you're fairly in with the local church and you would hear through the church but I am not a very religious person so I haven't got that contact but if it were to go up on local noticeboards saying we are doing this on an X day ..I wouldn't mind that.

**M** There is plenty of free space in the local papers, you know the freebies.

**Male (Blandford discussion group 2):**

I find that the differential between forestry and crown estate type places, I find confusing, because although there may be signs up, there may not be signs up, so if you are on a push bike or something, you may not know where to go on the tracks basically, and adding to that, I feel myself that you don't see much information about it that you can utilise unless you know what you are going to look for. For instance if you know what you want to do, know where you want to go then do you really need someone to tell you, but if you don't where do you go to find out?

Participants were frustrated that they had seen no information about the drop-in days, they thought they should have been advertised in the local free advertiser: *The Blackmoor Vale*.

There was a strong sense that the Forestry Commission failed to reach local residents because it was focused at a national scale, and was forbidding because it represents big national government:

**Male (Blandford discussion group 2):**

There it has been cut back and there are paths and you see quite a lot of wildlife there. But I saw 'Forestry Commission' and that in a way put me off because I saw 'Commission' and 'Forestry Department'. Why is it not a better name for instance?

**PT** What sort of name.

**M** Well, more friendly

**M** Woodland Trust.

**M** More inviting yeh.

**M** Party instead of Big Brother, yes.

(Laughter)

**M** It was more like it was a bar to go there, you know, it's Forestry Commission don't go in.

Participants readily offered ideas of the sort of engagement process that might work:

**Male (Blandford discussion group 1):**

If you had someone who came from the Forestry who came and said we know exactly where our forest is and take a couple of local people and say now we are here what do you think about it – is the sign-posting alright, can we get in all right, can we park the car all right, could we get a wheelchair down there, this sort of thing.

**PT** It would have to be a group of this size wouldn't it?

**M** Just a couple of people you wouldn't need too many but someone actually with the Forestry Commission with a bit of clout to be with them and then you could pull up as we say these handouts of whatever it is, website.

**M** Yes, what also would be quite good is if you had a design team working on it. You could get the local schools to do the designing, they could go up there in an evening, take the photos and write down what they enjoyed of it, you know that would be great, you could have the kids' point of view about how good it was.

**F** Which would involve, like you say, all the children from the schools, an out of school club, why not get all the input in together, and like you say make the leaflets, the maps, and what the kids enjoyed.



## PART 3

# Critical review of the New Forest–New Future process



The review is based on the information gathered about the communication process in the New Forest, and the research in Cranborne Chase and North Dorset.

Comparison of deliberative democratic processes on the basis of outcomes is unlikely to be satisfactory (Chess and Purcell, 1999). The outcomes of an equitably conducted deliberative process should go some way to meeting the agendas of all participants, but are unlikely to be completely satisfactory to everyone. If the outcomes were evaluated only from the point of view of the decision-making agency, for example, this would tend to favour processes that met the agency's management needs, rather than those that achieved a genuine dialogue. One of the main purposes of deliberative processes is to improve the democratic structure (through 'social learning'), and this means that success can be assessed according to the quality of the process itself: 'to assess whether or not it meets criteria of democratic participation and enables participants to experience direct benefit from taking part' (Barnes, 1999: 67). Webler (1995: 38–39) advocates general goals of *fairness* and *competence* which also serve as a yardstick for evaluation:

**Fairness:** 'not only are people provided equal opportunities to determine the agenda, the rules for discourse, and to speak and raise questions, but also equal access to knowledge and interpretations'.

**Competence:** 'shared social constructions of reality....understandings about terms, concepts, definitions and language use; the objectified world of outer nature (nature and society); the social-cultural world of norms and values; and the subjective worlds of individuals....this is accomplished through the use of established procedures'.

An evaluation of processes intended to engage stakeholders and local communities therefore seeks to address the following questions:

- Was the structure of the process clear?
- Whose agenda was being considered?
- Who was included/excluded and why?
- To what extent did the process result in social learning and capacity building?
- Was expert knowledge made available to all parties?
- Were the views of participants listened to and acted upon?



## Engagement processes

The role of the Forest Design Plan Forum was made clear to all participants; plans and agenda were circulated in advance, and the meetings were chaired and managed in a highly professional way.

### Strategic and local issues

There was some confusion at the Tollard Royal meeting between general policy issues (like restoration of plantations on ancient woodland sites or the state of the timber market) and site-specific issues. Different techniques might be appropriate for stimulating and capturing the debate in these two areas, for instance, the technique of drawing on maps ('planning for real') is more appropriate at the site-specific end of this spectrum.

Some of the officials and experts were responsible for specific territories, and so saw no benefit in being rotated round the different tables (each representing part of the plan area). It might be better to allow participants to circulate at will between the tables. Clarity about the type of issue under discussion at any one time could be improved by gathering views on wider policy issues in general discussion before or after dealing with site-specifics on maps. A distinction can be made between strategic issues, e.g. the depression of prices in the European timber market or the need to increase forests as carbon sinks, and local issues, e.g. the edge of that woodland is too straight or there is a problem of security in that car park because it is too well hidden. The FDP forums also focused on strategic rather than local issues, and although the consultation process (based on discussion of detailed maps) was oriented around local issues, respondents spoke about strategic issues:

**SS** The ecological section of the forum which I suppose broadly you could say would be the Hampshire Wildlife Trust and English Nature have always, or have fought a long time, lobbied for, the Inclosures that were created here in the 1960s, which are known as the Verderers Inclosures, to be restored back to heathland..... we've recently moved on to Cranborne Chase where the issues are restoring ancient woodland.

The two referred to immediately above are major issues addressed by the design plans. These are strategic, based on national and international policy discourses of managing and conserving nature, and therefore quite remote from the concerns of those local residents with no specialist knowledge of nature conservation. The design plans are themselves effective at a strategic level, and are backed up by 'operational site assessments' (OSAs) that address local issues on a site-by-site basis. FE were clear that there were too many OSAs to be the subject of consultation, and so the main issues they wanted discussed were the strategic issues underlying the plans. These are the competent issues for the membership of the Forum, who are used to formal consultation processes:

**HCP** I was just thinking, going back on this business about consultation that, I mean we are very used to it this end, with receiving maps and sending information off and it might have been easier to have included a lot of that information before we actually got to the discussion stage. And that we are perhaps more used to that, where we send off people archaeological information and include it on the maps, we then go out and have a discussion on site about what you do about this, that and the other. So I felt that the process was perhaps being lengthened in a way that we weren't used to.

On the other hand, the opportunity to meet FE officials, and to talk to the other consultees within the Forum was valued by Forum members.

**HCP** By having everybody together you can actually exchange views and you can hear what everybody else has got to say and you understand that there are other issues and what the problems were; they also were able to show us on site what is required and also give us an idea of how they had reached that discussion, or decision.

Recognising these points, a process could be designed that performs the functions described. The elements of such a process would be:

- Consultees to be given detailed information on the plans, highlighting issues affecting their particular expertise or area of responsibility.
- Consultees to be given the opportunity to respond formally in writing.
- Plans amended to take the formally expressed views into account.
- Meeting of the Forum to debate the (mainly strategic) issues among the various disciplines and interests, and with the responsible land-managers.
- Careful capture of the views expressed at such a meeting and a transparent process leading to reconciliation of views (as far as possible) and further amendment to the plans.

### Engaging with lay stakeholders

The plans need to take account of the views of lay stakeholders at some stage, or rather at several stages. The process of deliberation with lay stakeholders is clearly separate from the FDP Forum process and needs to be designed accordingly, but that does not mean the Forum should have no role in this process, indeed their expertise is essential to it, and since they are part of the governance structure along with FE managers, they should be exposed to its democratic process. One method would be to research lay stakeholder views before drawing up or revising the FDP. Such research would begin with stakeholder analysis, and then deciding on the appropriate methods for each group:

**JS** It turned out that the best way to engage with the Waterside housing estates was actually notices on gates that they went through to access the forest, and not organising parish councils in some of the villages.

Recorded forest walks might be suitable for local residents, for instance, while questionnaires followed up by telephone interviews might be appropriate for tourists. It would also be appropriate to apply these methods during and/or after the development of the plans within the Forum.

The drop-in days at Blandford Forum and at Shaftesbury, intended as a means of engagement with local communities, were probably not the best way of achieving this. Attendance was very poor because advertising was inadequate, and even if everyone had known about the events, only those with a particular interest would have been motivated to attend. In the New Forest, attendance was very variable, and only large in areas where there was current controversy about forestry operations or plans.

**SS** ... we have variable success across the forest. Quite interestingly in places like the Waterside there were issues of heathland restoration; we attracted a lot of people there. In some of the outlying inclosures which had very local use we attracted a lot of people. When we came to Lyndhurst and did an exercise in a core part of the forest we attracted about half a dozen people. Because there was no particular ownership of the large core group of Inclosures there was no particular local ownership sort of psychology, if you like, nobody really thought that's my inclosure I want to go along and have an input.

One of the lessons learned was that less-formal events were less confrontational and tended to lead to more constructive debate:

**Document: New Forest Inclosures Forest Design Plan** It was found over the course of public consultations that the forest walks were more productive in eliciting people's views about the draft plans than the indoor events. The indoor events, especially the formal presentation element and the question and answer sessions, had the potential to develop into an 'us and them' scenario particularly if the area being discussed contained potentially contentious proposals. The forest walk events gave the opportunity to relate proposals to real examples on the ground and therefore focus attention on the Forest Design Plan. Indoor events tended to be dominated by questions or comments about more detailed management issues such as path and forest ride maintenance or brash clearance following work.

One of the problems associated with the process is that of representation – how to represent the reality of the forest in a village hall. The maps used for the Forum were 1:10 000 scale technical forestry maps; the more familiar OS 1:50 000 series might be more appropriate for this purpose. Some excellent aerial oblique photographs were included in the displays, but it is not clear whether or not local residents would readily relate such photographs to maps. The problem largely evaporates when people are actually taken into the wood, since it is reality, rather than a representation, that is being discussed:

**SS** If you say to people do you like that patch of wood over there better than that patch of woodland over there and showing them a standard P1950s Corsican pine that has got nothing underneath it and then some mixed woodland with some regeneration going on they will say we like that, that looks more natural, that's our vision for how we would like things done in the future. So you could immediately in that context understand what they prefer to see, whereas when you're talking to them in the village hall or church hall it's very difficult to get that sort of information out, because they don't know what they're describing.

## Whose agenda was being considered?

The claims of success for the New Forest experience in developing a debate between members of the Forum and local residents (of Waterside Estate) were based on the moderation of the demands of the conservationists through contact with the counter demands from local residents.

**Document: New Forest Inclosures Forest Design Plan** One area in particular attracted interest because the draft plans depicted extensive heathland restoration in an area of woodland which had been used for some years by the community for informal recreation. Public opposition to the draft plans was expressed at our indoor public consultation meeting at which several forum members were questioned by the public about the proposals. This experience helped forum members to understand the balance that needed to be achieved between ecological aspirations and public access issues and draft plans were subsequently amended to reflect this balance.

The heathland issue was built within the Forum and then taken to the local residents, and although perceived as successful by FE managers in meeting their agenda, this process fails to give local residents much chance to develop their own agenda. As we have seen, the agenda discussed at the Forum meetings very much followed the managerial views of foresters and conservationists, and since the drop-in days were poorly attended, there was little opportunity to listen to the needs of local residents. If these publicly managed forests are to deliver public goods, the needs of these local residents will be particularly important.

FE managers had an instrumental view of the reasons for the process; they saw it as a means to get FE plans approved and to balance the most contrary views of some of the forum members:

**Document: Changing forests–changing cultures** Foresters started by defending their plans. The plans themselves, unintentionally, helped limit discussion.

**JS** Waterside was very good because communities and Forum members realised that that process was a circular (reflexive) process because the plans got modified to retain more of the 50s and 60s conifers than the Forum group wanted because residents were saying that we want more shelter for our dog walking.

The methods used reflect this. Adopting the more receptive view, open to the views and aspirations of stakeholders, including local communities, would lead to somewhat different methods. In effect, local people were being asked closed questions of the type 'Do you prefer this pine forest to open heathland'. The agenda belongs to the questioner and the answer might be a simple 'yes' or 'no'. A clearer view of the views of local communities might be obtained by contacting them directly and asking them open questions of the type: 'Can you please describe the use you make of the FE woodland?'. This allows people to talk in their own terms about their own agenda. The discussion groups conducted as part of the research illustrate the effectiveness of this approach in revealing the views and aspirations of the local community.

## Who was included?

The Forum was designed to include those with expert knowledge, those who would expect to be consulted because of their official positions, and influential people most likely to cause trouble if their views were not taken into account. In the case of the Waterside Estate, this group was co-opted to assist FE managers in meeting local people with a view to reaching compromise between the demands of Forum members, which were based on scientific discourses emphasising conservation, and local residents who demanded access for local forest use.

Drop-in days at Blandford and Shaftesbury were not effective in including people, because they did not attract representation from either local users, local non-users or tourists (who might be important users). Formal stakeholder analysis would have identified these groups as important participants. This was recognised by FE managers:

**Document: Changing forests–changing cultures** Visitors from outside a local area can go effectively unrepresented: some have societies or pressure groups but there is, for example, no English dog walkers group or family countryside visits group yet these interests represent literally millions of people in our forests every year.

The discussion groups explored the interests of local users and non-users.

A lesson learned from the earlier experience in the New Forest was that local operational staff also need to be included:

**Document : New Forest Inclosures FDP** It has subsequently been recognised that the group which was largely missing from forum deliberations was our own Forest District operations staff and that subsequent ownership of the plans during implementation has been lost. It has taken several years for these teams to develop a better understanding of the wider concepts of the plans and how this should be reflected in actions on the ground, especially when many actions were contrary to traditional forest management for which they had been trained. In subsequent FDP consultations on other parts of the district, operations or beat staff have been actively involved at each stage of the process and seem as a result to have higher levels of ownership and commitment to their implementation.

## Social learning and capacity building

Within the Forum process, there was a strong sense of sharing information and views, and therefore of mutual learning. The CC&ND process clearly did not reach local communities and therefore an opportunity for learning was missed. The discussion groups revealed considerable potential to increase the public benefits realised by small, rural FE woodlands near towns, and this demonstrates the value of this type of active engagement.

## Sharing expert knowledge

One of the main purposes of the Forum is to share expert knowledge, and this was achieved effectively; the need to obtain and to share expert information was well understood by FE managers:

**JS** Right at the very beginning we said you are the experts, we are not, actually we are generalists and you are the experts, many of you actually have information which we don't have access to. If you look at the information that we have in Queens House it is not well catalogued, it's not interrelated and many of you hold key information probably which may be very useful to this process and that was another benefit that came out of the process.

As we have seen, the Forums discuss strategic issues, often based on grand-scale discourses like the need to restore lowland heaths as part of a global need to increase rare habitats. On the other hand local, site-specific knowledge was not always included, for instance, on one interpretation, 'official' representatives were expected to seek out local experts themselves:

**HCP** Yes, I think this would be seen as part of the follow-up discussion about doing more work. He is actually trying to pull the knowledge that we have got from these sorts of people and there is also an issue about Grovely Wood that quite a lot of Second World War activity took place in that and I know the person to contact to discuss about that as well. So I think I would see it as going through me to look at that and using their knowledge, but they weren't invited.

## Empowerment of participants

The main question here is the extent to which views expressed by participants were acted upon, and seen to be acted upon. This is the subject of the much quoted 'Arnstein's ladder' (Arnstein, 1969), in which the author ranked participation on a scale of empowerment from 'manipulation' to 'citizen control'. Participation to legitimise the policies and actions of countryside agencies would be classed as manipulation; participation to ensure that the legitimate interests of all stakeholders are properly taken into account would be closer to 'partnership' (near the top of the ladder). Failure to convince participants that their views are taken into account results in them becoming disaffected and unwilling to co-operate. In fact, FE managers were well aware of this, and acted on it at an early stage in the NFNF process:

**Document: CRN Article** In the beginning people were sceptical about the Commission's intentions and the extent to which they would be able to influence the proposals. Their trust grew as we began to report back to them on how the Forest Design Plan Forum was taking account of local views and revising some of the inclosure proposals.

The one instance where this did not happen with Forum members was in the case of one member from English Nature (interview with DB) whose points, made at the first (CC&ND meeting), had clearly not been carried forward to the second meeting. However he raised them again and agreed to a site meeting. Compromise was reached after the site meeting but is still waiting confirmation. The points written on the maps and delivered verbally need to be recorded and fed back to participants. There should be an opportunity for participants to agree the record.



## PART 4

# Conclusions and recommendations



The participatory approach adopted by Forest Enterprise, based on 'New Forest-New Future', is a two-stage process. The first stage involves the creation of a Forest Design Plan Forum, populated by representatives from statutory bodies, influential local people and people with appropriate expertise. The plans discussed are medium to long term, addressing strategic issues such as plans for thinning and felling, habitat restoration, and proposed changes to the forest structure.

In the second stage, local communities are addressed by FE managers and/or other Forum members, to explain and obtain support for the plans, and also provide a new arena for debate and compromise between local needs, and the thinking represented by the plans.

There is no doubt about the benefits of this new dialogue both to FE managers and to other parties to the debate. FE now feel they have a 'licence to operate' and they are freed from expensive and unproductive conflict. Forum members, for the most part, feel that their views are being listened to and acted upon.

The FDP Forum process worked well, and was clearly valued by the Forum members. It could be improved by:

- Making a clearer distinction between strategic and site-specific issues, and choosing engagement methods appropriate to these two sets of issues.
- Careful, iterative, recording and feedback of views expressed, demonstrating that participants are being listened to and that their views are incorporated into the plans and acted upon.

Community engagement is achieved through 'Drop-in days' backed-up by forest walks, when the opportunity arises. 'Drop-in days' are less formal and less potentially confrontational than public meetings, and have worked well, especially where there was keen local interest in a controversial proposal. However, the participants self-select, and attendance of any kind was very low when the process was applied to the more fragmented forest holdings in Cranborne Chase and North Dorset, which is also more typical of Forest Enterprise holdings in England.

As we have seen, the objective of community engagement was to obtain local consent for the Forest Design Plans. This objective is in itself manipulative – it concentrates on the FE agenda – and not on the agenda of the participants. It was not met cost-effectively by the Drop-in days. It would be better to identify, through stakeholder analysis, the individuals or groups that need to be contacted, and then to discuss *their* agenda with them, in relation to simplified information about the main features of the woods under discussion, and the Forestry Commission's aims for these woods. These ideas can then be integrated with the design plans, and fed back for further discussion. For this purpose, informal events like forest walks and coffee mornings are more effective than formal meetings.

The management objectives for community engagement need to be reconsidered. If state-owned forests are to realise their potential for the provision of public benefits, publics need to be identified through formal stakeholder analysis (usually involving several local managers) and engagement methods need to be specifically designed to reach each stakeholder group. The needs of these groups can then be negotiated through deliberative dialogue. This will be achieved either through in-depth qualitative research, or through an increase in activity on the part of community rangers, for example. The subjects that will be discussed will include simple, often site-specific concerns such as dog-walking, litter, accessibility, recreational facilities, and are unlikely to concentrate on big strategic issues like the need to restore lowland heaths. Again the process should be transparent; it will be particularly important to record the points made and feed them back to the participants.

Large strategic issues are best dealt with using an approach similar to the 'Citizen's Jury' (Smith and Wales, 2000) or Citizen's Advisory Committee (Vari, 1995). These are formal processes in which a group of citizens comment on the public interest after being presented with the facts and options in consultation with experts. The 'verdict' is then passed to the land-managers, who make the decision. Citizens' juries, like public inquiries, can be expensive to run and depending on the issue, either an abbreviated design could be used, or the process could be integrated with the wider planning system, to spread the cost (and to improve the planning process).



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## Further reading and information

The Social Research Group is part of the Environmental and Human Sciences Division of Forest Research. Other titles of interest produced by the Group include:

- **Trees are company: social science research into woodlands and the natural environment** (2002)  
edited by Liz O'Brien and Jenny Claridge
- **Health and well-being: trees woodlands and natural spaces** (2003)  
by Paul Tabbush and Liz O'Brien
- **A sort of magical place. People's experiences of woodlands in northwest and southeast England** (2004)  
by Liz O'Brien
- **Involving people in forestry. A toolbox for public involvement in forest and woodland planning** (2004)  
by Max Hislop, Mark Twery and Heini Vihemäki
- **Accessibility of woodlands and natural spaces. Addressing crime and safety issues** (2005)  
by Liz O'Brien and Paul Tabbush
- **'Proving It!' Evidence gathering for forest managers** (2005)  
by Suzanne Martin and Liz O'Brien  
Forestry Commission Information Note 64
- **Social science in forestry. Public participation and partnership: a review of Forestry Commission practice and governance in a changing political and economic context** (2005)  
by Sue Welldon in collaboration with Paul Tabbush
- **Leisure landscapes: understanding the role of forests and woodlands in the tourism sector. In: Forest Research Annual Report and Accounts 2003–04** (2005)  
by Suzanne Martin

For further information on the above titles:

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website [www.forestresearch.gov.uk/socialresearch](http://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/socialresearch)

